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# ENG 2007-001: Introduction to Creative Writing: Fiction

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*Eastern Illinois University*

2007-001

# English 2007-001
# Introduction to Creative Writing: Fiction
# Summer, 2010
# M-F 11:00-12:15, CH 3159

# SYLLABUS

**Course Description:** An introductory, workshop-style class devoted primarily to discussion of the students' own work. Early on, the approach will be fairly prescriptive, with discussion of model stories and blunt how-to advice on plot, character, style, and narrative form. Later in the course we will be much less prescriptive, trying to critique each story on its own terms, judging how well it fulfills its own implicit aspirations, with every class member asked to give a personal appraisal. Expect to complete a number of exercises in a workbook, to participate in a group project that involves evaluating and presenting published stories, and to write three stories of your own, submitting two of these for workshop discussion. Attendance and participation will be very important. An enjoyable class, but lots of work, and not always easy on the ego. Prerequisite: English 1002G. Group 6. To access an updated version of this syllabus (if you are seeing it in hard copy), visit my home page at
http://www.ux1.eiu.edu/~jdkilgore/.

**Instructor:** John Kilgore. Office: 3331 Coleman Hall. Hours: MR 3-4. Phone: 581-6313 (office), 345-7395 (home). E-mail: jdkilgore@eiu.edu. When leaving voice mail at the office, include date and time of call.

**Required Texts**:

Burroway, *Writing Fiction*, fifth edition (WF)
Winegardner, *3 X 33: Short Fiction by 33 Writers* (W)
Kenison & Patchett, eds., *Best American Short Stories, 2006*(K)
Dozois, ed., *The Year's Best Science Fiction*, 18th ed. (SF)

**Course requirements**: regular class attendance and participation; assigned readings in the texts; very careful reading of work by other students; assigned exercises in workbook; group exercise; three short stories of about 1200-2500 words each, the first two of these to be distributed for class discussion; optional rewrite of first or second story, with new grade replacing the old. **The three stories will count for about 60% of the final grade, the workbook about 20%, participation and intangibles (including the group exercise) about 20%.** I reserve the right to depart somewhat from these percentages.

**Attendance policy.** I will take attendance (by means of a sign-up sheet) in every session. The resulting record, adjusted somewhat for qualitative factors, will be used to figure a participation grade equal to about 10-15% of the final grade for the course. Scale for the participation grade: **0-3 absences = A, 4 = B, 5 = C, 6 = D, 7 = F; more than 7** = continuing, proportional grade penalties (the attendance grade will become a negative number, averaged into your overall course grade). The effect of this formula, by design, is that perfect or near-perfect attendance will give your grade a healthy boost, while chronic absenteeism will make it impossible to pass the course.

Note that you have 3 "free" absences. Use these if you have to, but otherwise keep them as insurance. I will listen sympathetically to excuses, but **I will not normally award attendance credit for any session that you have missed.** In **truly exceptional** circumstances, however, I **MAY** be willing to assign difficult and challenging make-up work for attendance credit. See me if you prefer make-up work to taking the absence. (**Hint:** It's easier just to be here. Honest.) Note: it is your responsibility to find and sign the attendance sheet at each session, to make arrangements for make-up work if necessary, and to ascertain that the record has been corrected when the work has been done.

**The textbook.** Burroway's *Writing Fiction* is a comprehensive, readable, wise how-to manual for fiction writers. Liberal chunks of it have been included in the assigned readings, and the book is certain to be helpful — eventually — to anyone who keeps trying to write fiction over a period of time. The problem with excellent advice on writing, however, is finding out where and how to apply it. Every story and every writer are different from every other, and what works wonderfully in one place (or for one person) may be completely counterproductive elsewhere. As a result, what I call a Platonic approach to writing instruction — giving complete and detailed instructions first, and only *then* turning to the writing task — usually doesn't work. You can spend a whole semester developing an excellent conceptual understanding of fiction without ever finding out what really works *for you*.

Our approach will be quite different. We will plunge in; we will learn by doing; we will muddle through; we will fly by the seat of the pants; we will shuck and jive; we will improvise, trusting that the process itself is a way to discover what one is about.

It's a tested approach and works quite well for most people. But one corollary is that there will be no reasonable time or place to go over the textbook. We will need to spend the class time on more focused activities: writing, brainstorming, critiquing one another's work, arguing about assigned readings.

Please understand that I am **NOT** saying "Don't bother reading it." **DO** bother reading it, very patiently and carefully, as assigned; but decide for yourself when, where, and how to apply Burroway's principles. Eventually — well before term's end, with any luck — you will start seeing some important connections and your writing will benefit from them.

**The workbook**. Will be a place where important basic exercises are done, and where (with luck) many stories start. In general, the exercises are creative projects that try to a) drill you in fairly specific skills needed by fiction writers; b) stimulate

story ideas. With luck some of the exercises will take off and turn into stories, and **you are welcome to turn in the same prose twice, though extensive revisions should normally take place between the workbook stage and the finished-story stage.**

**Please observe the following format guidelines:**

- Use an accordion file or pocket folder, **NOT** a spiral notebook, **NOT** a looseleaf binder, so that you and I can conveniently reshuffle assignments.
- Write your name in large, clear letters both on the file and on every assignment.
- Type **and paginate** every assignment. In-class writings done by hand will sometimes serve as drafts for assigned exercises, but should then be typed up out of class, with revisions as you see fit.
- Make sure every assignment has a date, your name, and a heading and exercise number drawn from the table below (e.g., "Exercise #1, Journal").
- **Make a habit of bringing the folder to class with you, as you will have the chance to read from it and get feedback.**
- Organize work clearly in chronological order, earliest to latest. Keep class handouts (you will be getting a ton of these) in another folder, please.

**Stories.** Should be the fruit of long and thoughtful revision – third or fourth drafts, put into the very best form you can manage at the moment, though subject (of course) to further revision should you have new ideas after workshop discussion. Clear and articulate writing at the sentence level is a must (yes, even for first-person stories in dialect) because everything starts there. Writing is endless labor (though endless pleasure as well), and publishing writers spend huge amounts of time and energy tinkering, revising, and polishing. Try to follow this example; cultivate your own readiness to take pains.

**Short Story Guidelines.** (Rules of thumb I urge you to follow, probably, most of the time, unless you feel strongly that you shouldn't.)

**A word about grading.** (Click here for my harangue on the topic.)

**MANUSCRIPT FORM. PLEASE NOTE CAREFULLY.** All assignments must be typewritten. **Paginate everything.** Workbook exercises should be double-spaced in 12-point font, with margins of at least one inch. For workshop stories, you must provide multiple copies—two for me, one for every other member of the class. To save copying expense, go ahead and use single-spacing and smaller fonts (but no smaller than 10-point) on the workshop stories. Skip an extra space between paragraphs when single spacing, as you would for instance in a business letter (and as I do in this syllabus), and keep the margins generous. The final story and the rewrite (if you choose to do one) will not go into workshop, so there, again, return to double spacing and to 12-point fonts. Omit extra spacing between paragraphs on double-spaced manuscripts.

Whenever you hand in something you prefer not to show to the rest of the class, write "DR" ("don't read") at the top of the first page. I will feel free to read aloud–

or even to copy and distribute—anything you hand in that does not bear this warning, though I will not announce your name in doing so.

**Late work.** Always get in touch with me BEFORE the deadline if you expect to be late with an assignment; the chances are pretty good that I can give you a short extension. Otherwise late work will be penalized one grade step (e.g., from A- to B+) for each calendar day of lateness, weekends and holidays included. Pick up the phone, dial my number, and save yourself from this demoralizing fate.

**Miscellaneous.** There will be no midterm or final examination.

I will be more than happy to grant reasonable accommodations to students with documented disabilities. Contact me or the Office of Disability Services (581-6583) if you will be needing such an accommodation.

Please make a habit of bringing this syllabus to class with you, as we will need to refer to it rather frequently.

Please be aware that the penalty for cheating or plagiarism, which I trust I will not have to impose, will be automatic failure of the course, plus a formal report to the Judicial Affairs Office. See me if you need further explanation of what constitutes cheating or plagiarism.

## SCHEDULE

Note: **READ AHEAD** to make time for writing projects. Be sure to read the stories included in the chapters in WF when they are specifically scheduled for discussion; otherwise they are optional, though recommended. See end of schedule (or link at left) for detailed instructions for Workbook exercises.

Note abbreviations: WF for *Writing Fiction*, W for the Winegardner anthology *3 X 33*, B for the *Best American Short Stories* volume.

**1) June 14-18**

**M:** Course Intro.
**T:** Williams, "The Use of Force," WF 42; Diaz, "The Sun, the Moon, the Stars," W 428. **Begin Exercise # 1, Journal. (See instructions below.)**
**W:** Continue with above.
**R:** WF, Chapters 1-3. Short Story Guidelines (handout).
**F:** Updike, "A & P," W 1000; Malamud, "The Jewbird," W 659.

**2) June 21-25**

**M:** In-class readings & brainstorming.
**T:** Hood, "How Far She Went," WF 46.
**W: In-class, paint-by-numbers story. (Instructions will be given in class.)**

**Workbook due on Thursday or Friday; include Exercise # 1 and Wednesday's in-class writing.**
**R & F:** Swann, "Secret," B 43.
WF, Chapter 6, pages 178-85 only; Chapter 7, all (but stories are optional).

**3) June 28-July 2**

**M:** Wolff, "Bullet in the Brain," WF 190. **Story #1 due from volunteers. Choose favorite story and provide copies for your study group.**
**T: Workshop.**
**W: Story # 1 due.**
**WR: Workshop.**
**Begin work on next installment of workbook:** EXERCISE #2, Narrative Time Experiment. EXERCISE #3, Point of View Experiment. **(See instructions below.)**
**F: Group Meetings in class.**

**4) July 6-9 (No Monday meeting)**

**TW: Workshop.**
**RF: Group presentations (See instructions below.)**
In-class readings & brainstorming
**F: Workbook Due. (Include Exercises 2 & 3.) Reading TBA**

**5) July 12-16**

**M: Story #2 due from volunteers**
**T: Workshop**
**W: Story # 2 due**
**WRF: Workshop**

**6) July 19-23**

**M: Reading TBA**
**T: Stories due from volunteers**
**W:Optional rewrites due**
**WRF: Workshop as needed**
**R: Story # 3 due**

# Workbook Exercises

**Note:** all exercises should be double-spaced and paginated, with appropriate headings.

## 1. Journal

Write on **six** different days during weeks 1-2 (June 14-23), about 300 words per day. If an entry gathers momentum and takes off, you may let it count for two consecutive entries, but no more. (Of course, you are always free to continue it on your own, perhaps turning it in later as a story.) Date all entries, and give double dates for double entries.

The purpose here is to build the habit of daily writing, to give some valuable practice in basic fictional techniques, and with luck to scare up a few story ideas. **AVOID** giving tedious summaries of the day's events, unless something really exciting has happened. Choose topics from the following list instead, or invent projects of your own that are more focused and lively than a listing of what-I-did-Tuesday.

### Suggested Topics

**In the first person, write a reminiscence of a time, a place, or an action that comes from at least five years back in your past. Make the reader aware of the lapse in time that separates the narration "now" and the experience "then." Feel free to fictionalize and invent.

**Capture in writing the *voice* of someone you know well. As your speaker narrates some fairly ordinary episode, let his or her character emerge vividly through his (your) choice of language and detail.

**Go to some public place and "collect" a few of the people you see there, discreetly sketching them (in prose) in your notebook. Describe 2-4 in terms of clothing and personal items; 2-4 in terms of physical characteristics; 2-4 in terms of tics and behaviors. Make this a double entry (count it for two days) and try above all to make your brief sketches vivid and concrete. Don't get caught and punched out by your subjects.

**Sketch from memory 3-5 places you know well, trying to "put us there" as directly and quickly and completely as possible. Notice how concrete details matter more than anything else in this effort.

**In the first person, confess to the commission of some evil or illegal or shameful act. Feel VERY free to fictionalize and invent.

**Describe some person you dislike, using a made-up name, bringing the portrait to life with significant, vivid detail. Fictionalize as freely as you like.

**Capture the most interesting thing that you have done in the last year. Avoid summary; concentrate on concrete details and images. Tell us nothing that we could infer for ourselves.

**Overhear a dialogue in some public place. Transcribe exactly what you hear. Then edit the transcript and write an imagined continuation of the dialogue. *Note:* you won't have to overhear much—dialogue fills up the page in a hurry.

**Remembering that the impact of fiction depends less on what happens than on how vividly that "what" is realized, write something **shocking.** Write rapidly and continuously for no more than 40 minutes. If you then can't stand to show me the result, file it and hand in something else.

**Picture the worst thing you can imagine happening to you, happening. Write a sketch that makes this horrible fantasy real. Feel better now?

**That memory that you can hardly bear to look at? The one that, even now, makes you shudder, blush, and feel nauseated? Pretend it happened to somebody else, and write about it. Don't force it: if it won't come, turn to something else.

**In the third person, write a detailed sketch describing yourself engaged in some characteristic activity, perhaps a sport or hobby at which you are proficient. **Keep to the third person**, but get us into the character's point of view, letting us know what "he" or "she" thinks and sees as well as what he is doing.

**Practice the art of the flashback by creating 2-3 of them, in either the first or third person. For each flashback, write the end of one paragraph in which some action or thought is completed; then the beginning of a new paragraph which clearly takes us back to an earlier point in time (something that, in a story, is ordinarily done for a very definite reason: to give us needed background to what we have seen already). Try to avoid having your character "drift off," "think back," "suddenly recall," etc., a gimmick that tends to be clumsy and a bit trite. When the moment is right, a story can usually backtrack quite gracefully on its own, without the assistance of an unlikely sudden daydream on the character's part.

**Write a sketch in which the speaker tries vigorously to explain his or her side of the story; but in which we realize, somehow, that his version can't be trusted.

**Depict a powerful but hopeless "crush," i.e. romantic fixation. Start by describing the person desired, giving significant physical detail. Try to avoid naming emotions directly (with words like *longing*, *passion*, etc.); instead, let them emerge implicitly from the details given.

**Choose a character in your life towards whom you feel some degree of conflicting emotions. Portray that character, starting with a physical description.

**Write a sample dialogue, including at least three characters, in which you try to

practice all the different forms of punctuating and tagging dialogue: tag first, tag last, tag in the middle, tag straight, tag inverted, no tag – and use the comma, the period, the dash, the question mark, and the exclamation point, all correctly. Refer to a published story for guidance, and perhaps to a grammar handbook. This one will be a perfect pain while you're doing it, but you will always be glad you did. Most student writers are woefully deficient in the basic mechanics of dialogue, and you won't be.

**Write a dialogue of 2-3 pages, observing the following guidelines: a)Think of this as a fragment of a much larger story, so that you can focus intensely; b) Remember that dialogue in fiction is **enormously selective and brief** compared to the long, meandering conversations we have in real life; c) Start by clearly envisioning the scene and the speakers; d) Support the dialogue with appropriate visualization as needed (don't let the characters fade out to mere voices); e)Incorporate indirect dialogue or summary ("They talked about the weather for a while") along with the direct dialogue, as a way of re-emphasizing that more gets said than the reader directly hears.

**Visualize a moment of intense grief, shame, or emotional hurt from your past. Then sketch the moment as fully and thoroughly as possible **without** ever once making direct reference to any emotion, or relying on obvious physical cues (tears trickling down cheeks, long sighs, etc.) to evoke it. Concentrate instead on capturing the way powerful feeling shapes the perceptions of the physical milieu, and on the way specific memories and odd thoughts go whirling through the mind at such moments. The point is not so much to make the reader "guess" the feeling as to "show rather than tell."

## 2. Narrative Time Experiment.

Render the same event or sequence of events in A) a sentence; B) a paragraph; C) a sketch of 2-3 pages. Purpose: to practice control of narrative time; to learn the importance of scenes while experiencing the perplexing truth that almost anything is a scene if you render it that way.

## 3. Point of View Experiment.

**In the third person, limited omniscient:**

Render the same small event or scene or character from the perspective of three or four different characters. About 2-4 pages total, single spaced. Pointers:

- Be **SURE** to read Burroway's discussion of point of view in Chapters 7 & 8 **BEFORE** doing this exercise.
- Remember to write in third person, not first.
- Nevertheless, the diction in each passage should suggest the inner speech of that character. Good third person narration feels "overheard." The chief challenge in 3rd-person subjective point of view is finding the right mixture of character-language and author-language.
- In each passage, restrict yourself all but completely to the perceptions and

thoughts of that character. Avoid "authorial intrusions."

- Use the character's name sparingly – ordinarily just to signal the transition into or out of the character's point of view. Likewise, phrases such as "Jean felt," "John thought," "reflected Bob," and so on should be kept to a minimum. If the point of view and language are being handled skillfully, we don't need these constant reminders of whose eyes we are looking through.
- Sentence fragments and clipped free-associations from one incomplete thought to another can help convey the sensation of being "in the head" of a character; the challenge is to preserve overall coherence at the same time.
- You may want one of these passages to consist largely of reverie; but for the most part, concentrate on capturing, not the character's "inner thoughts," but the external world as it appears to that character. Overly subjective writing is **DULL.**
- Try NOT to make any of the fragments a complete anecdote. Instead, imagine each as a fragment part of some larger whole, a story you might complete someday.
- One or more of your characters may be an "unreliable viewpoint." In fact, point of view characters in third-person fiction are nearly always at least a little unreliable.
- Remember that our emotions and beliefs color our perceptions, and try to capture this effect in your sketches. A park bench seen by a homeless wanderer is a very different thing from the same bench seen by a happy tourist, an infant, a cocker spaniel, a convalescing rape victim, etc. Well controlled third-person subjective writing captures and dwells on these differences. It shows who and what the character is **BY FOCUSSING ON THE DEFINING QUALITIES OF THAT PERSON'S WORLD** – not by direct reverie or stream of consciousness, which are generally easier to write but less effective.
- You may use different tenses for the different fragments, and you may want to have the characters recall or perceive the same event (or place, person, etc.) from different temporal distances.

## Group Project – Special Directions

** At the beginning of Week 3, everyone in class will be more or less randomly assigned to a study group. The groups will arrange to meet out of class, if necessary.

** Each member of each group is to nominate a story to be read by the class as a whole -- normally, your "favorite story of all time." **These selections are due Monday, June 28.** Choose stories that are NOT already included in the assigned readings (see syllabus). Provide copies for each member of the group, or refer your group to page numbers in any of our four anthologies, or provide URLs for reliable online copies.

** Everyone in the group **must** read all the nominated stories– carefully–by **Friday, July 2.** On that day the groups will meet during the normal class period. The purpose

of the meeting will be to 1) choose **one** story, out of the three or four nominated, as the group's favorite to be presented to the class as a whole; 2) plan your presentation to the class.

** Each group must provide copies of its elected story for the class as a whole – 12 copies, minus 3 or 4 since you will already have made copies for your group discussions. The exception will be stories from any of our anthologies – for these, you merely need to give us the page numbers. Copies of stories – or page references – are due on **Tuesday, July 6. Groups 1 & 2 will present their stories on Thursday, July 8, Group 3 on Friday, July 9.**

** Presentations should begin with each member of the group stating what story he or she nominated and why. Give a brief, vivid summary and some discussion; expand our knowledge of stories we want to get to; share your enthusiasm for this author and work.

** Beyond that, the nature of the presentation will depend on the chosen story and your group's preferences. Remember that the class has read your story, and pitch your presentation accordingly: summary is unnecessary, and detailed discussion of scenes or passages is quite kosher. In most cases you should explain your group's reasons for choosing this tale, explaining what you find admirable, why you think this is good work, what makes this story special. Then go on to explore the story with us, commenting on character, plot, theme, style, and any details of craft you find noteworthy. Remember that we are all writers, interested in picking up knowledge of technique; ask yourself what we can learn about writing from this particular story.

Some other questions you might want to pursue:

- What is the main conflict?
- Is the conflict convincingly resolved?
- What kind of person is the main character, and how do we see this? Is the character of the protagonist consistent with the action taken? Does the conflict grow convincingly out of the pattern of the character's life, or does it feel imposed?
- How is the style of the story appropriate to the content? What instances of "showing not telling" and "putting us there" do you find especially compelling?
- What is the point of view of the story, and how is this controlled?
- What do you know about the author, and does this information enrich the story in any way, or teach us anything about the creative process?

**These are suggestions only, to get you started: do not feel limited to this list, and avoid proceeding through it as if it were a checklist: try instead to give your discussion inner logic and organic unity. All members of your group should participate in your presentation. Be as creative and theatrical as you like, but remember that your underlying purpose, still, is to show critical appreciation for the story chosen.

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